

Part Martha Stewart, Part RuPaul

'Brini Maxwell Show' Offers Household Tips in Drag

By CHRIS HEDGES

Brini Maxwell, the svelte and stylish creation of Ben Sander, is a drag queen's answer to Martha Stewart. Dressed in a meticulously coiffured blond wig, patent leather pumps and an array of vintage dresses, she gushes over obscure household tips, etiquette and recipes on her weekly television show.

Annoyed by the black heel marks on the kitchen linoleum? Try a dab of lighter fluid on a paper towel. Want to save money on paper plates? Wash and reuse the trays from TV dinners. Interested in a new dish to delight your guests? How about a crown roast of cheese?

"Cheese," says Brini, stealing a line from the critic Clifton Fadiman, "is milk's leap to immortality."

"The Brini Maxwell Show," taped in Mr. Sander's small Chelsea apartment by his mother, the actress Mary Jane Wells, appears in Manhattan on Time Warner Cable television's leased access Channel 35 on Friday nights (8-30 uptown, 9-30 downtown). Though there are no viewer ratings systems for leased access cable shows, Brini (rhymes with "teeny") has received hundreds of letters and e-mail messages since the show began in January 1998. And the letters and messages suggest that Brini has a wide following that extends beyond gay viewers. Many of those who write in are straight fans who say they tape the show for friends around the country.

"My husband and I always enjoy your show and try to watch it every week," Brenda Dally said by e-mail. "I must admit, though," she continued, "that after one of your episodes, I feel quite inadequate to my role of wife, and know that my hubby probably feels a twinge of regret at marrying a modern career woman instead of an efficient, elegant nest builder like you."

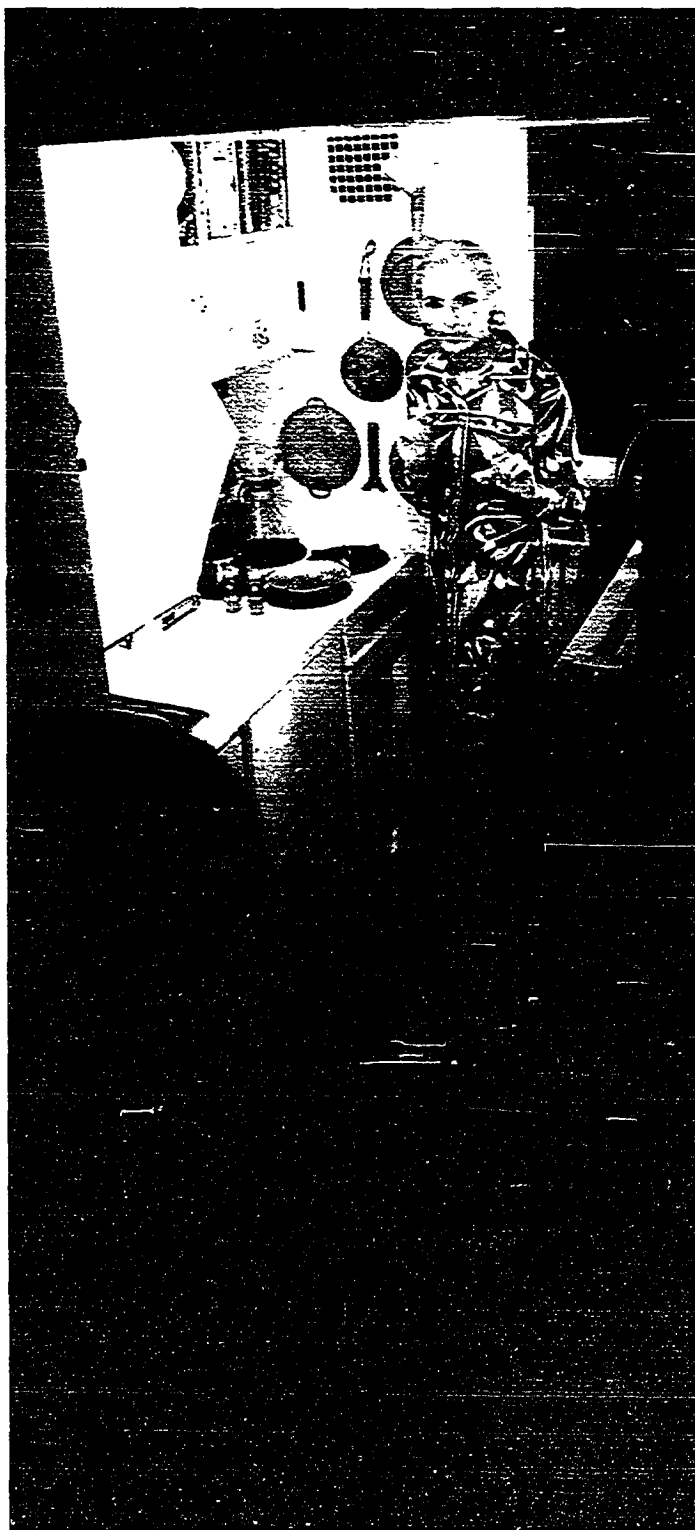
Mr. Sander says his alter ego's appeal lies in her polish.

"Brini is a terribly good cook and hostess," he said as his mother set up spotlights in his apartment last month. "She is the perfect homemaker. She slips in the door because she isn't threatening. She ushers in gay culture in an acceptable disguise."

Men in heels are nothing new on television. Milton Berle regularly donned a dress on "The Texaco Star Theater" in the late 1940's. RuPaul had a talk show on VH1 from 1996 to 1998 and has appeared in Old Navy commercials. Even Mayor Rudolph W. Giuliani wore a dress with knee-high hose to play an Italian grandmother when he was host of "Saturday Night Live" in 1997.

But if drag makes steady appearances on nationwide television, it has flooded Manhattan cable television: there are now five weekly programs with drag queen hosts and one with a woman dressed as a man.

Brini and three other drag queens — Cookie, Hedda Lettuce and Cherry Jubilee — were all nominated for the Grammy Award for Best TV Performer, given by the drag queen com-



Edward Kesting/The New York Times

Ben Sander, as Brini Maxwell, exudes a triple threat of Donna Reed, Marlo Thomas and Mary Tyler Moore in one cable television show. Sadness never comes to call

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On Cable, Part RuPaul, Part Martha Stewart

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munity at the annual ceremony on Dec. 2 for shows telecast last year.

Some 300 drag queens and their guests burst into sustained applause as Bruni, dressed in an ivory floor-length skirt with a side slit, a black sweater and a Mongolian lamb's wool wrap, swooshed through the crowd at Life at 158 Bleecker Street and onto the stage to accept the award.

"It is wonderful how supportive the drag community is of each oth-

er," she said, her white rhinestone necklace flashing in the stage lights.

Bruni has appeared in 28 episodes since the show began. The program started out as "At Home With Tigs" and centered on a jet-setting drag character known as Tigs Vanderveer. But Mr. Sander felt the character was "too tony" and turned to his fourth-floor walk-up for inspiration; his apartment is filled with furniture, artwork and dishes that are decades old.

He then took the name Bruni from a character in a Stephanie Powers mini-series called "Deceptions" in which she played twins. The name Maxwell came from Barbra Streisand's character in "What's Up, Doc?"

Bruni's outfits include capri pants, produced on Mr. Sander's sewing machine, and billowy skirts with garish bows. The music is from old vinyl records. (The theme from "A Man and a Woman" and "Girl Talk" are favorites for ambience.) The result is a composite of television characters played by Donna Reed, Mario Thomas and Mary Tyler Moore.

"Ben is trying to recreate his childhood," Ms. Wells volunteered from the kitchen.

"Mom," he says, "I was born in 1969."

Although the fictional models were long gone by the time Mr. Sander became a dedicated television viewer, he reaches out to recreate the security and innocence of their worlds.

"I don't feel accepted unless I am Bruni, a character who defines social acceptance," Mr. Sander said. "With Bruni I have more self-confidence. I express myself more freely. I think of myself as an icon. Without Bruni I am a loner who finds it difficult to make lasting friendships. Parts of me are so disparate and there is some shame associated with them. It is difficult to let all of myself be known to people. I guess part of me is ashamed of being gay."

Each show opens with a montage of shots of Bruni posing in Central Park on the Alice in Wonderland sculpture (as did the television character Rhoda); standing in front of Bergdorf Goodman in a bright checkered coat and turquoise hat, wearing a blue and white dress, along with a red, white and blue



Edward Keating, The New York Times

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pillbox hat, in front of the Queensboro Bridge.

Episodes revolve around tensions between Bruni and her overweight and jaded neighbor Mary Ellen, played by Thom Hansen. Mary Ellen, whose acerbic asides are lost on Bruni, is recruited into various household tasks she would prefer to forgo. When Bruni makes Swedish meatballs, Mary Ellen is ordered to kneed the ground meat, but finds that her fake fingernails come off in the dish.

"A wise woman will prepare her nails after dinner," Mary Ellen intones into the camera.

Bruni inserts 30-second shorts — called "Why Didn't You Think of That?" — that give household tips, like showing how to boil spices in a pan on the stove to get rid of the smell of stale cigarette smoke. Old teapots, Bruni instructs, can be used to store string, with the end popping out of the spout.

On Manhattan television, a flood of hosts who are men in dresses.

Sadness is relentlessly held at bay, even when it intrudes in the lives of the cast. Mary Ellen is the willing victim in an episode on how to care for an invalid, taped while Mr. Hansen's real-life partner was dying of lung cancer. Bruni calls the delivery of the food to the bedridden Mary Ellen "Meals on Heels."

"Donna Reed's mother would never have died," Mr. Hansen, 46, said in an interview at Mr. Sander's place, over cheese and crackers.

Household advice and proper etiquette are incorporated into the program, always with perfect diction and aplomb. The studied effort of Bruni as a self-created society maven, who finances the show with rent collected on a family-owned apartment, sometimes makes it hard to determine if it is a spoof.

In a program on having a bridge party, Bruni makes little sandwiches in the shapes of hearts, diamonds, clubs and spades. A segment dedicated to "the legacy of the hippie" went on to thank the hippies for "ecology, compost heaps and granola."

"The hippie has given us so many marvelous things," said Bruni, seated with perfect posture, "although I can't say the clothes were wonderful. But then we won't question people's personal choices."

Last night's show was "A Salute to Wine and Cheese," although Bruni slips cheese into nearly every epi-

sode. Bruni told viewers how to store cheese and how to make toasted sesame cheese wafers and classic cheese fondue. Mary Ellen warned viewers how not to be taken in by the pretense of wine, although she mispronounced every label she picked up. For example, she pronounced the "t" in merlot. The half-hour program ended with a wine and cheese party in the apartment.

But the show isn't all cooking and cleaning. "Ladies, what do you do with your free time?" Bruni asked in one episode, wearing an ivory short-sleeve sweater and a plaid skirt and dangling a black pocketbook from her ankle. "I mean the time you spend waiting for the dentist, or on the subway, or at the plastic surgeon's or gynecologist's office? Well, here is an interesting option. Why not get beneficial exercise and use your purse as a leg weight? No one wants cottage cheese thighs."

THE SHOWS

Hosts in Drag

Where to find the shows on cable television in Manhattan

"The Bruni Maxwell Show," Fridays on Time Warner Channel 35, 8:30 p.m. uptown and 9:30 p.m. downtown

The Hedda Lettuce Show, Mondays, 2:30 a.m., Time Warner Channel 57 and RCN Cable Channel 110

Starsnip Chicklet, with Drag Superstar Chicklet, Tuesdays, 11:30 p.m., Time Warner Channel 56 and RCN Channel 108

On Patrol, with Brandy Wine and Brenda A. Go Go, Sundays, 2:30 a.m., Time Warner Channel 67 and RCN Channel 107

Dragkingclub (That Show), with Johnny Science (a woman dressed as a man), Fridays, 10 p.m., Time Warner Channel 57 and RCN Channel 110

Go There TV, with Cherry Jubilee, Mondays, 12:30 a.m., Time Warner Channel 56